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## Reflecting on Leadership

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## Reflecting on Leadership

### Introduction

The theory of leadership that I feel most accurately correlates with my own way of leading is servant leadership. A *servant leader* is a very empathetic leader who is naturally born to serve a group of people, understanding and acting upon not only the needs of the population they serve but also the needs and condition of the least advantaged of that population. The leadership styles I find preferable depending on the situation include democratic/participative and (whether good or bad) laissez faire. In the sometimes time-consuming *democratic/participative style* of leadership, the leader will welcome and encourage feedback, creativity, and optimism by including the group in decision-making processes and providing guidance without stomping on self-esteem or disrespecting the intellectual value of those they lead. In stark contrast, a leader who utilizes the *laissez faire style* will place their entire trust in their subordinates with no guidance on how or when to execute tasks, riskily relying on the skill and work ethic of those that they lead. It seems that how we lead and what styles we as individuals adopt for specific situations hinge heavily upon the three following influences: (1) our upbringing and formative experiences, (2) necessity, and (3) mental health or mental illness. By exploring these three influences upon leadership and the ways in which these influences have shaped my own leadership theory and styles, I hope to gain a better understanding of my own leadership and the influences that have led me to who I am as a leader today.

### Upbringing and Formative Experiences

The first influence upon preference of leadership theory and styles is one's upbringing and formative experiences. Personally, this influence is one that I struggle to leave behind me on a daily basis. My reversion to laissez faire leadership style when I am in a tough situation with others roots itself in the environment in which I was born into. I grew up in an abusive household, where violent outbursts could not be predicted and walking on eggshells became a way of life, of survival. A laissez faire leadership style offered me a way to not take responsibility for the outcome of an environment in which I had no control. This style allowed me to escape my body and mind or to go numb in a household where anything I said or didn't say, anything I did or didn't do correctly could lead to very dangerous situations. Numbing out and taking away responsibility for a situation that I could not change helped me survive for years growing up. Once I learned to train my brain to go to a "safe" place during the abuse, I placed

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my total trust in my parental figures to create and recreate what I believed to be a normal familial situation, no matter how dysfunctional and dangerous it seemed to outsiders.

While I grew fond of both the freedom from responsibility and the reliance on trust of the laissez faire leadership style, I also began to learn the values of democratic/participative leadership. Growing up, I poured myself into school, my grades, and work. At the time, I saw that making good grades could be my way out alive. As I became more and more involved and exposed to people outside of my home, my mindset began to slowly shift.

For the first time, observing how my friends' parents treated their children caused me to see that my home life was not normal. Distancing myself as much as possible, I joined extracurricular clubs and started working after school and in the summers, beginning when I was fourteen. I worked at a library, a newspaper, a tea room, babysitting, and pretty much anywhere else that would give me time away from home. At school, I focused heavily on academics. Both the clubs and the jobs exposed me to a diverse spectrum of leaders. The leadership style that I experienced to be most effective with most people was democratic/participative leadership.

The most productive and satisfied groups of people that I found myself among were led by a servant leader who utilized a democratic/participative leadership style. Specific examples of servant leaders who used a democratic/participative leadership style that I recall were a visual art teacher I had in ninth grade who made art matter to rural high school students and a history professor with whom I interned one summer at Erskine College. Coming from a home environment where I trained myself in a laissez faire leadership style as a mean to survive, these servant leaders who were able to go without recognition but also manage a group of people without crushing self-esteems and creativity through their use of democratic/participative leadership left a deep mark on my psyche. For the first time, I met adults whom I was not afraid of. These servant leaders, through their empathy and selflessness, saved my life in many ways. Thinking back, the servant leaders were only a handful of the leaders I was exposed to, but they taught me that there was a whole different world outside of my home that was safe, where people were nice and calm. Naturally, I emulated these leaders as I grew older because I saw how effective they were.

### **Necessity**

Second, how we lead and what styles we as individuals adopt for specific situations hinge heavily upon necessity. As I mentioned above, I developed the habit of choosing the laissez faire leadership style out of necessity. The unpredictable emotional ups and downs of my home life growing up caused me to lead from the perceived safety of a backseat. I was constantly being

told that I should only be seen, not heard. To do this, laissez faire leadership offered a hiding place where I could be myself while also trying to live up to the everchanging standards my parents set out for me.

I left home when I was fifteen and never again lived with another family member long-term. Like I had hoped, doing well in school opened much-needed opportunities to escape my home life. At fifteen, I was accepted into the Rotary International Youth Exchange Program and spent a year living in Taipei, Taiwan, staying with host families and attending a local Taiwanese high school. At sixteen, I was accepted into the S.C. Governor's School for the Arts and Humanities in Greenville, SC, where I spent my last two years of high school living in dorms and pouring myself into my art area, creative writing. While I am incredibly grateful for these opportunities, they were not easy or perfect by any means. What they did provide me though were somewhat safe spaces to gain invaluable leadership skills, theory, and style. These leadership skills included time management, the importance of communication among peers, and public speaking. These skills, my preference of the servant leadership theory, and my growing fondness of the democratic/participative leadership style were formed out of necessity to assimilate into these new environments, rather than desire for improvement.

Flying by myself to a foreign country where I did not know the language, people, or culture pushed me headfirst into a leadership role. Being in Taiwanese schools and host families, I represented an entire country through my actions and words. This is where my affinity to the servant leadership theory took hold. I wanted to combat the pervasive stereotype of Americans being loud, rude, and closed-off to new cultures and ideas (like the Americans I grew up with). I wanted to serve quietly from behind the scenes, with no recognition. Growing up in a household with no empathy made me incredibly empathetic and sensitive to others' feelings and moods. I understand that being a servant leader usually comes later in life, but even now, I feel this is the leadership theory that I most identify with and have seen to be most effective.

## **Mental Health**

Lastly, the process of how we lead and what styles we as individuals adopt for specific situations is heavily influenced by mental health or mental illness. As anyone in the mental health community knows and understands, mental illness takes a toll on one's ability to function socially, intellectually, and professionally. Being a survivor of childhood physical and emotional abuse is such a strong part of who I am. On one hand, this has and will continue to help me be an advocate for others and myself, providing me with a sense of independence and inner strength that I do not think I would have obtained otherwise. On the other hand, living with that chronic trauma from a very young age did not leave me unscathed, as others who have lived through

similar situations can attest to. The long-lasting effects of abuse have been the most difficult path to trudge along in my adulthood. The mind works in beautifully adaptive ways when placed in unhealthy situations. For me, the main adaptation or coping mechanism (along with depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideations) for living with volatile adults was an eating disorder. It was a way to find control in a place where I had none. Even as I moved away from my parents and into my adult years, my twenty-year long eating disorder offered me familiar hope that I was in control, that I didn't have to be afraid. It worked beautifully for a very long time until I had to make a decision whether to seek professional help or die.

Now three years into recovery from my eating disorder and still struggling with other leftover symptoms of the abuse, I wonder how my own leadership has been affected by mental illness. Would I choose a different leadership theory if I were "mentally healthy?" Would I be more of a natural, charismatic leader who identifies with transformational leadership theory if I were free from mental illness? The aspects about mental illness that I believe most severely affect a person's ability to lead are the fatigue and loss of concentration. A huge misconception about mental illness is that it is just a problem of motivation (the traditional "pull yourself up by the bootstraps" mentality). A friend gave me a quote in my early stages of my recovery that compared recovery from an eating disorder to brain surgery without the scalpel. This can be applied to recovery from any mental illness. You are rewiring lifelong thought processes, neuropathways, and deeply rooted beliefs. This understanding that I've gained from my own mental illnesses influences me greatly in my choice of the democratic/participative leadership style. Living without this type of leadership growing up showed me fairly quickly that people cannot survive without having a voice in the decision-making process of a group. Open, comfortable communication across hierarchical lines whether in a professional or familial setting forms the backbone of any emotionally safe environment. If a person doesn't feel safe, then nothing productive will happen, especially creativity and optimism that are so essential to success in all aspects of life.

Whereas mental illness caused my leadership style and choice of theory to be more passive, I also think that, if not dealt with head-on in with medical professionals, mental illness can also impact a person's leadership style in a malicious way. My biological father (I also like to call him the sperm donor because I don't feel comfortable with the term "father" when referring to him) held onto anything and everything that he saw as a threat. This manifested into him becoming a psychopathic narcissist who would do anything to have the upper hand or assert his power. I grew up fantasizing, wishing, and hoping that he would just kill me. As a child, all I

wanted was for him to just leave me in a ditch with my body face-down in the grass because being dead would have been a lot easier than living with his unpredictable outbursts. I firmly believe that his leadership style and theory derived from unhealed wounds from his past (and maybe his genetic makeup). To me, the mental stability or instability of a person permeates all parts of their lives, especially in the way they lead.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout this leadership statement, the three following influences on leadership theory and styles were explored and explained through my own personal experiences: (1) upbringing and formative experiences, (2) necessity, and (3) mental health or mental illness. I identified the servant leadership theory as most preferable with my two most used leadership styles as democratic/participative and laissez faire. It is so fascinating to learn about the formative experiences that make a person who they are and impact how they evolve as a leader. Being in a leadership role places one in the spotlight. Every insecurity, every belief of self and one's abilities, and every emotionally raw spot are on an almost microscopic display for leaders, especially in times of stress. Humans are such complicated, interesting creatures. This is why I wanted to explore the influences that go into creating a leader because there is so much more beneath the surface than meets the eye.